

Still Sophistic (After All These Years): An Interview with Susan Jarratt



Judy Holiday

Abstract: In this interview Susan Jarratt reviews the trajectory of her scholarship and revisits some of the lessons learned from a variety of her projects while simultaneously drawing out historical and narrative continuities of seemingly disparate time periods and contexts. In doing so, she elucidates the value of scholarship as a political and instructive tool that can be usefully applied to both teaching and administration.

Susan Jarratt's scholarship spans 20 years and covers an array of topics that includes (but is not limited to) histories of the Sophists, memories of Sappho, rhetorics of space, and feminist pedagogies. Immense in scope, that scholarship forms the frame of my interview with Jarratt. Since Jarratt's biographical story had already been fascinatingly narrated in *Women's Ways of Making It* (2008) and her own outlook on the professional and public status of rhetoric had been expressed in "Rhetoric in Crisis?: The View from Here" (2003), I opted for a scholarly frame, which turned out to have been a serendipitous choice. Talking about the trajectory of Jarratt's scholarship and its relationship to her teaching, administrative work, and world view brings to light what might otherwise go unnoticed—a clearly articulated anti-colonial politics underlying all of her work. Jarratt's scholarship comes together in its close attendance to subordinated stories, either untold or forgotten, narratives that expand histories and frames of reference. Call it feminist, inclusive, or postcolonial, Jarratt's work takes up various topics and time periods and consistently calls forth new publics or complicates old ones. In an animated and unrecorded moment after the official interview, when speaking about traditions that challenge the trope of the Western rhetorical tradition, Jarratt made a welcoming gesture with her hands and piped "Bring it on" (meaning, there's plenty of room for additional frameworks—the more, the better). In her 4 C's blog entry on diversity ("Where"), Jarratt clarifies this stance, writing that "Edward Said has taught us so eloquently, all histories contain worlds of differences within, undiscoverable once they have been crammed into the box of 'Western tradition.'" Given her anti-colonial stance toward history and life, the trajectory of Jarratt's work gains prominence in the ways it uncompromisingly works to de-naturalize histories and the very practices of scholarship itself. Her scholarship embodies the hope she expresses in "Rhetoric in Crisis?: The View from Here"—that "our rhetorical teaching and research might have far-reaching effects."

Susan Jarratt is currently a full professor of Comparative Literature at University of California, Irvine (UCI) where she served as Campus Writing Coordinator from 2001-2007. She is the author of *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* and co-edited *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words* with Lynn Worsham. Jarratt is currently working on *Chain of Gold: Space and Memory in Post-Classical Greek Rhetoric* (tentatively-titled) about "the significance of space and the imperial relationship in ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric" and the *Norton Anthology of Rhetoric and Writing*. Her recently published "Classics and Counterpublics in Nineteenth-Century Historically Black Colleges" (*College English*, November 2009) rounds out a lengthy list of publications that includes dozens of articles and book chapters. Examined collectively, these works are a testimony to the breadth and depth of Professor Jarratt's research interests.

Judy Holiday (JH): Knowing that even today most of us within the field of rhetoric and composition came to it by chance, I want to ask you about your origin story. How and why did you choose rhetoric and composition?

Susan Jarratt (SJ): Thank you for asking me that. I'd love to tell my origin story. Like you, I was interested in language and loved to read and was a kind of "schoolgirl," you know, when I was a kid, loved English class, was the teacher's pet, liked to write. In my generation, that translated logically to me to becoming a teacher of English, which I did. I majored in English and History and became a high school teacher and did that for six years.

In the process, I got a master's degree in English—British and American Literature. This was all wonderful. I really enjoyed literary criticism, the practice I was introduced to. It seemed a bit distant from—in fact, it seemed hugely different, distant from the teaching scene.

I taught in San Antonio, Texas, and most of my students were under-prepared. I taught ninth grade a lot and I recall that the average reading level for the ninth grader in my school was sixth grade and kind of drifted down to fourth

grade. I actually had a few students who were illiterate, didn't know their letters. Almost all of them were abysmal writers.

The challenge of open admissions has been written about eloquently and figured and understood by Mina Shaughnessy. She asks the question I had: what does one do? What does a teacher of reading, language, do with under-prepared students? Fortunately for me, the field of composition had been invented, and so in my master's program I had a course in composition studies along with the literary studies. That was a conversion experience. It really opened my eyes to a way of working with my students and their writing, the process revolution. It was wonderful. I loved it. It changed my whole relationship to the teaching situation and it introduced me to a field.



Then I realized that there was a program in rhetoric studies at University of Texas (UT), Austin, so I went there and learned about the field of rhetoric attached to writing, and I became interested in history, in fact, in ancient history.

That's a version of how that happened. Actually, the program that I put together was a combination of literary studies and history of rhetoric. I read Victorian non-fiction and rhetoric, very broadly construed. I wrote my dissertation on Victorian non-fiction prose with a sophistic base.

JH: How did you bring that work to *Rereading the Sophists*?

SJ: Well, the initial chapter, the analytic that I developed for reading these non-fiction prose writers I derived from the sophists. It was an epistemologically-based reading about language constituting knowledge (a very familiar idea now, but new and exciting to me then), so I explored the way that worked in three different disciplinary fields in 19th-century British prose, reading Darwin, John Henry Newman, and Walter Pater. It seems distant now, but the intensity of their arguments—the density, the elaboration—gripped me. Each was forging a field. Having spent the first part of my studies on the “literary,” I was swept up in the power of extended excursions into the “real” and at the same time constructed worlds of nature, religious commitment, and aesthetics. It seems vast now. I can't imagine how I convinced a committee to let me write on all these things, but it was a great experience. I worked with wonderfully supportive people at UT, faculty working across wide disciplinary differences.

When I got my job at Miami and started thinking about publication, I realized that there are probably a handful of people in the world who can write such comprehensive books that move over many centuries, but I decided I probably wasn't one of them. Or maybe it was a matter of process: I had to start somewhere to turn a dissertation into a book, so I started with the ancient Greek rhetoric. Then I realized what a huge, huge, huge task that was and just began working at that and wrote a couple of essays. I was really fortunate to have a leave before tenure so I could concentrate on writing.

I remember a deciding moment there was when I ran into one of my classmates, David Jolliffe, at a conference and was talking to him about what I was doing. I hadn't really, I don't think, given up on the larger picture, the Victorian stuff. I just hadn't gotten to it yet. He just, very casually, just said, “Well, what you're writing on, ancient rhetoric, is really interesting. Why don't you just go with that?” I thought, hmm, maybe I could just go with that, so that's what I did.

JH: You have credited various women with bringing you to feminism within the academy including Dale Bauer, Kristina Straub, Bonnie Lyons, and Eileen Lundy, and you mention that your identification with the women's movement came later.

I was wondering if you would share some of your conversion story there as well as your conversion to feminism institutionally and then also perhaps talk a little bit about the divide you felt between what you saw institutionally and in the women's movement, or why your identification came later with the social movement.

SJ: Sure. I'm not sure that I'm—I may have misrepresented myself in some way. I'm not sure that I feel a big divide between feminism and the women's movement. I'm not one of those people who was an activist feminist and then confronted academic feminism and found it alien. In fact, it was the other way around: I met feminists in the academy and they raised my consciousness.

Bonnie Lyons was the first person who did that. She's a professor in English at University of Texas in San Antonio where I got my master's degree. She was teaching women's literature, one of those early women's literature courses. I think our anthology was called *Images of Women in Literature*. She was such a passionate teacher and so committed in the face of ignorance and resistance (including my own).

I don't know that there were any feminists in her class. I think it was an undergrad class and I was taking it for graduate credit. We talked a bit and I taught a class. American short fiction is what we were reading. I wrote a journal and she made a lot of comments, so that was where dialogue could take place about my ways of seeing a gendered world or an ungendered world and how she saw things. All those sociological subjects related to women came up via the short stories: women's identification, love, marriage, child-bearing, professions, things like that.

She was just—the word “relentless” comes to mind, but she was just so strong. She really had brilliantly articulated positions and held them in the face of the challenges of the class without alienating people. That was my introduction to feminism, in an academic setting.

I think the way I got to know more about the women's movement was when I became a professor and then, I guess, really, as far as I could perceive for the first time, ran into a few barriers myself, not serious, though, at all. I really have benefited from prior feminist movements certainly, and then just really have had a quiet, easy time of it professionally, for the most part. I don't have one of those stories of fighting my way through a sexist forest to make my way. I would describe my hire as “affirmative action.” My colleagues made very clear that they wanted to hire a woman (and some of my male friends who were competing for the same job made clear that they saw my success in the same way!) But I have no problem with that recognition and “paid it forward” when I made a bit of trouble in my department that led to our hiring a senior woman when I pointed out the gender imbalance across ranks. This move took an enlightened chair. (Not only did he agree to a position for a senior woman, he added a partner hire—so essential to get people at an advanced level.) It wasn't a heroic solo action on my part, but I brought my influence to bear. This memory connects, now that I think about it, with my tendency these days to think more about negotiation and bridges to power. Just one moment in a feminist academic career—it's hard to document them all. All the moments are important—the grad student who comes in with the story about her (older, male) senior professor turning up at her door with a six-pack to discuss her dissertation. What to do? The solutions—or rather, possible responses—are so complex. Perhaps it's always been my impulse to think it through rather than organize a demonstration.

I did have more teachers, Kris and Dale, my junior colleagues who taught a theory course, and I learned a huge amount from them. Dale and I collaborated on feminist sophistics in a wonderful summer conference. She's been such a stalwart feminist friend over many years. One outcome was my beginning to think about women and gender in the history of rhetoric and pedagogy. I began to teach women's studies at Miami and eventually directed the program. It was really that academic link that made me aware of the women's movement and led to whatever kind of activism I did, basically grounded in my institution. The activism concerned women's issues (e.g., my first “clothesline” experience) but also about race (a huge issue in a small southwestern Ohio institution) and Native American issues. Miami University's mascot was the Redskins when I arrived. The only football game I ever “attended” was to protest the mascot at the gate. A group of us succeeded in getting the mascot changed to “Redhawks.” So feminism has been intertwined with other sites of discrimination along the way.

JH: My next question is again a question about feminism and social activism—and I now realize it has to do with my own background. For a long time, I thought that the study on rhetoric and composition naturally led to feminism since both examine how the Western tradition hierarchically orders difference producing all sorts of exclusions and oppressions.

I have noticed that an understanding of difference doesn't necessarily translate to other subject positions of difference. What I had assumed a logical progression from rhetorical study to social activism is not necessarily the case, and yet they are certainly related. You speak about this relation in *Feminism and Composition Studies*. In *Rereading the Sophists*, you distinguish sophists from feminists but also show that sophistics provide an analytic for “exposing the contradictions inherent in dominant discourse” as well as a means for “challenging hierarchies and discourse and in the institutions those hierarchies keep in place” (*Rereading* xxiv).

Can you say a bit more about the distinction between sophists and sophistics and feminism? Sophists were outsiders who had an understanding of being on the outside, right?

SJ: I think the sophistic movement, a historical phenomenon in fifth and fourth century B.C.E. Greece, and feminism do need to be distinguished clearly. In fact, some people who read that chapter in my book and read it, I think, not very carefully will say, oh, well, she's asserting that ancient Greek sophists are feminists. What I do in that chapter

is to point out the parallel operations of difference in the philosophical and rhetorical scene in fifth century Greece and in the contemporary scene of feminist theorizing, analytics and politics.

JH: I thought you made the distinction very clear, by the way, in that chapter.

SJ: I think you've put it very nicely in the question, that a sophistic way of thinking enables any sort of politics that wants to undo hierarchy-based binaries of difference: feminist, race-based, queer, whatever.

Then a whole set of features can connect to the underprivileged position and sometimes those are parallel across differences. Philosophical rectitude and truth can be associated with masculinity in the period of the sophists, and the mobility and shiftiness of "sophistic," with the feminine. Those associations persisted at a lot of different sites. I thought that was an alignment that was worth pointing out.

It doesn't mean that the sophists were feminists. A sophist was someone who had the propensity to overturn hierarchies or to challenge traditional conceptions of social order. Gorgias chose to do that with the reputation of a woman, Helen, and so there's an alignment there. Sophistic rhetoric can be read by a contemporary feminist with an eye to these operations of hierarchy and difference in a distant historical period, one in which "rhetoric" was forged.

JH: Right, so speaking of these operations, is there a way that Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), then, can you use this kind of reconstructive analytic?

SJ: I think my rhetoric, the rhetoric of administration in my case is a little cruder. I don't know that I very often found myself in a situation of undoing power structures. It was more often trying to use alliances, find alliances with people in positions of power to try to advance programs that I felt were progressive and helpful, writing programs.

My position (Campus Writing Coordinator) was a consultative position. I didn't have a program. I didn't hire people or schedule classes. I consulted with faculty across the curriculum on upper division writing. The school felt that there wasn't enough attention being paid to writing or to writing beyond the first year and that's how this position came into being. In it, I found myself often as a defender of student writing. There are so many casual, stupid things that people believe or will say without thinking about student writing. That has to do with a general disdain for students as a group. I think I had to use the rhetoric of defense. That's really more advocacy and information-sharing. It's really not an analytic taking apart—

JH: Right, because otherwise that would be really antagonistic.

SJ: It would be. I guess, when I was thinking about the question, I thought I had two strategies. An overt strategy was articulation, trying to find common ground. So often I was butting heads with people who said "We don't want to offer a new course and we don't want to change our course, or we can't offer more writing or we'll offer writing differently." If I could find a point of articulation with their interests, that would open the door instead of my just saying, well, yes, you can or yes, you should. I basically didn't have any power. My only power was persuasion.

A related strategy that I'm really interested in right now—one that was used by Greek sophists in the period of Roman empire—is "figured discourse." With figured discourse, you're saying one thing but you imply others through a submerged reference to a shared body of knowledge.

When you're in a meeting and you're deliberating on an issue, you have policy or something to make a decision about, but at the same time, I'm there as the ambassador of writing. Everything I say potentially has an effect, so I'm often thinking about how to phrase something in a way that will send a message on some other level than in terms of the particular question at hand: something that may indirectly improve my position and the position of writing. It's a kind of, I don't know, diplomatic discourse: trying to think of what the embedded messages might be when the conversation is about something else.

I'm not sure if I can give an example. Let's say there's one question on the table, but I know there's another question that's lurking. This is probably just good administrative, or pragmatic administrative practice. You know there's something else in the wind and it's going to come up. You can phrase it such that you set up this next thing for success, you pave the way.

JH: For a special issue of *Enculturation* devoted to the question of whether or not rhetoric is in a state of crisis, you wrote "Rhetoric In Crisis: The View From Here" in which you first offer a sanguine view of the field followed by a more pessimistic view. In doing so, you model the sophistic techniques, if I'm right, of antithesis and parataxis which, in juxtaposition function productively as tools of invention.

Do you teach these or other rhetorical devices in your composition or graduate level courses?

SJ: This is a really good question. After *Rereading the Sophists* was published, Sharon Crowley asked, “Well, when are you going to publish a sophistic rhetoric?” which I’ve never done. She and Debra Hawhee have their wonderful textbook on ancient rhetoric, where, I’m certain, you can learn about antithesis and parataxis.

To answer directly, I don’t teach antithesis and parataxis to writing students, which seems to be hypocritical, doesn’t it? since I advise their use. I came to these figures in the context of historiography. They served me as ways to disrupt continuous and naturalized narratives.

What rhetorical devices do I use in my writing courses? The writing course that I teach the most often is an upper division course called Word and Image. The specific focus of the course has been news photography, in times of war. I got to it through my interest in ekphrasis and words that describe images. And also because of Susan Sontag’s book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. We live in times of war, so this is what the rhetorician should teach: what can be pictured, to what effect, and what can be said.

SJ: Concerning antithesis and parataxis, Victor Vitanza and probably others observed that, even though I was advocating a radical or unconventional form of composition, praising its practice in antiquity, I wasn’t practicing it myself.

I myself was working in a conventional hypotactic mode of argument. I think that’s a valid criticism and I haven’t really moved it out of that. The 4C’s blog on diversity was maybe the most genre-bending thing that I’ve done. I enjoyed it and would like to work more creatively. The craft of writing is important to me right now, not strictly in terms of particular figures but more generally in the sense of working with words and not just finding the serviceable words for ideas.

SJ: I don’t work very much with my students on the level of style. We have these ten-week courses and they just go so fast. Of course, I comment on their language, but we’re more often in these upper division courses looking at a bigger piece of writing and higher order issues. Organizing strategies of narrative or argumentative discourse, bringing research to bear, and how these features are going to be put together in a longer piece: these are some of the composition questions that I spend time with.

SJ: It would be so wonderful, wouldn’t it, to teach a course on style and just play with those ancient and Renaissance methods of working with language? Jorie Woods at UT, Austin, teaches such a course.

That brings us back to ekphrasis. When I first read about it, I thought of it as illustration, a description that not only describes something visual, but also produces a visual image for your reader.

SJ: Right. It’s connected with—do you know that term “enargeia”: bringing-before-the-eyes? It’s the ability to bring an object or scene vividly to life for the reader.

I became interested in it because I’m working now on Greek rhetoric in the Roman Empire. There’s a great attention to visual arts in that period and all of antiquity. It raises questions of representation in the colonial context. I’m trying to explore rhetorical artistry, indigenous colonial identifications, and the implication of the Greek rhetoric in circuits of imperial power. That’s all packed into my new title: *Chain of Gold*.

JH: How’s it coming along?

SJ: Well, I’ve written many really beautiful and interesting prospectuses. (This is a joke about delay and beginning over and over again.) I still have a ways to go on it.

The last major piece of writing I did on the topic was a talk last summer (2009) at The International Society for the History of Rhetoric: an analysis of an encomium to the city of Rome by Aristides. He delivered an oration in 144 C.E. He’s a member of the Greek intelligentsia, but associated with a city that has its own geographic locale and city identity and then they’re working with the imperial power structure, so these strata of power, space, language, are all being operated, and then comes the economic entanglement, the complicity, that’s where *Chain of Gold* comes in.

How do they use rhetoric in a colonial situation embedded in the complexities of imperial economy, space, and power? That’s my question.

JH: I see a connection between *Chain of Gold* and the work you did on the students in the HBCUs—the subject of subordinated subjects and their ability to speak and be heard. I appreciate the fact that in all of your writing you make very clear the political aspects of rhetoric.

SJ: I think of that as something I care a lot about. It's at the core of my ways of working.

JH: In *Rereading the Sophists*, you indicate that composition instructors should take on the role of public intellectuals like the Sophists whose practice was not confined to the classroom.

Given your experience, how do you feel about this coming now with respect to composition instructors?

SJ: Well, I would say—okay, with respect to composition instructors, I've been really impressed with the work in community literacy that's been going on lately. It seems like it's really flourishing.

I follow it and I think it's fascinating. John Ackermann and David Coogan have put together a collection called *The Public Work of Rhetoric* that brings together essays from a number of different people who have their own community projects and that other people are theorizing about it. I wrote an afterward to that collection. The work represented there is wonderful.

Another book I've learned much from lately is Elenore Long's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*. Diana George and Paula Mathieu are also doing great work in this area.

My own work with public rhetoric has been in teaching polemical non-fiction (e.g., Naomi Klein's *No Logo*; Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*). The goal is to explore the potential of a public through print publications on topical issues.

I'm teaching speech this quarter for the first time ever and really love it. It's really great. My students want to be leaders. They want to be lawyers, performers, activists. I guess I keep trying to define the academic work in terms of the idea of a public intellectual, both the teacher and the student. My department organized a course on civil disobedience in relationship to the California budget collapse and the collapse of higher education, and I'm also contributing to that.

JH: Yes, education works discursively. That's how I see it.

SJ: There's one person's way of living up to her own exhortation.

SJ: I have one more item to say about this—it involves the relevance Greco-Roman rhetors might have for the situation of the academic rhetorician in the 21st century. We in rhetoric and writing studies so admire the truth-speaker—the *parhêsia*stes. So much of the work in rhetoric and writing studies (and feminism) is oriented toward speaking truth to power. What my study of the Greek rhetors under empire has opened up for me (or reminded me of) is that there can be a virtue to being ambassadorial, trying to find the openings and use them in the highly constrained ways that we have open to us.

JH: Yes, both are forms of participatory democracy, the idea of which permeates your scholarship, particularly the notion that the study of rhetoric can foster participation. Your recent article in *College English*, rhetorical education in historically black colleges (HBCUs) beautifully illustrates the educationally important idea that you also discuss in "Sappho's Memory"—that "desire moves intellect."

The students of the three HBCUs you examine receive a liberal arts curriculum with classics at its core. They subsequently become politically enfranchised, taking on as a consequence of their newfound personhood "a sense of duty and responsibility rather than their assumption of a set of privileges" (140). You also make clear that the same curriculum did not necessarily have the same effects with other audiences.

Can you speak about these histories of the early HBCU students might speak to composition instruction?

SJ: Yes. I think these histories can speak to students today. In fact, I think that students at UCI and a lot of students at Miami as well were doing a fantastic job of creating themselves as public intellectuals. I think they do it through identification with a whole range of publics and counter-publics.

For example, the hottest issue on the UCI campus, the most contentious one, is Israel and the status of Jews and Jewish students and, on the other hand, the perspectives of the Muslim student union on the Palestinian situation. Students on both sides are putting themselves on the line—speaking publicly, writing, taking positions in a context of risk. They are speaking to global issues in which they have a strong stake. In this way, they are something like the students in the HBCUs.

JH: Right, so students today may be using different media, perhaps not newspapers, but as you said, the Muslim student association puts out a—

SJ: Public demonstration.

I think we could use more public speech, actually. I came here in 2001, so it was a kind of a dramatic entry. I moved here in August and then September 11th happened and I felt like I was on the edge of the universe. It was so strange, but it was good in that it propelled me into political alliances and groups, and all sorts of things happening in response to it.

One of the things I did as a campus writing coordinator was to organize a public student forum, speaking forum. The students, almost all of them, spoke about 9/11. It was just so immediate. The “extracurriculum” of the 19th century is very much alive on college campuses today and very encouraging. The students keep me alive and they counter-balance that sense of pessimism of public rhetoric in politics and mass media with a sense of mobility and variety and youth. They’re young and they see possibility and they find niches in which to use their language and their rhetoric. It’s good. They work with what they have, like the Greeks. They keep rhetoric alive in the newest empire, so I do see continuity.

Works Cited

Ackerman, John M. and David J. Coogan. *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholar and Civic Engagement*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P. In press.

Ballif, Michelle, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford. *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. Taylor & Francis, 1 January 2008. Web. 13 May 2010 <<http://lib.mylibrary.com/Browse/open.asp?ID=119770&loc=cover>>.

Crowley, Sharon, and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. 4th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2009. Print.

Jarratt, Susan. *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. Print.

———. “Rhetoric in Crisis?: The View from Here.” *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003). Web. 10 May 2010 <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/jarratt.html>.

———. “Classics and Counterpublics in Nineteenth-Century Historically Black Colleges.” *College English* 72.2 (November 2009): 134-159. Print.

———. “Sappho’s Memory.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32.1 (Winter 2002): 11-43. Print.

———. “Where Is the Rub with ‘Diversity,’ Right Now?” CCCC’s Conversations on Diversity. Web. 1 January 2010. <<http://ccccc-blog.blogspot.com/2009/07/whats-rub-with-diversity.html>>.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo*. New York: Picador, 2000. Print.

Krog, Antjie. *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000. Print.

Long, Elenore. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2008. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Print.

Interview with Susan Jarratt from *Composition Forum* 22 (Summer 2010)

© Copyright 2010 Judy Holiday.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).